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SERMON BY THE RT. REV. WILLIAM WHITE, D. D.

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OF THE CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE:

A Sermon

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Rom. 12, 1.—"*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of* God, *that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice; holy, acceptable unto* God, *which is your reasonable service.*"

In this epistle, as in others of St. Paul, there is drawn a perceptible line of difference, between the argumentative part of it and the practical. Of the latter, the text is the beginning: and considering the station which it occupies, we may compare a careful reader of the book, arrived at this place, to a traveller, who, having ascended an high mountain, by a road steep and beset with thorns, although not without a clue, looks down on the other side, along an easy descent, to a plain below.

The reason of noticing the transition, is because of the light thrown on the epistle generally, from the terms with which the text opens. There are some, who, by the double error of applying to individuals what is said of the collective bodies of Jews and Gentiles, and of referring to a final state, what has an aspect to Christ's visible kingdom in the present, have raised from this epistle a system accommodated to the favorite view of illustrating the sovereignty of God, without due regard to the no less essential perfection of his benevolence. Were it not, that the interpretation alluded to is here thought a mistaken one, there would be matter of wonder on what principle the inspired author laid down the plain precepts which follow, as an inference from the deep reasoning which had gone before; and especially, with what pro-

priety the mercy of God is looked back to as drawing, by a persuasive violence, to the perfection of Christian morals, which the apostle is hastening to disclose. This is not the case, when we interpret every part of the composition with a reference to the object kept in view throughout the whole of it. In particular, there then appears admirable pertinency in the introduction to the practical part of the epistle.

We have here one of the passages of Scripture, so full of sense and of persuasion, that, for the due efficacy of both, no more seems necessary than the bringing of the different members of the sentence fairly into view. The whole, however, may be the better analyzed, by its being considered as containing,

I. A pathetic introduction;
II. A persuasive motive;
III. A comprehensive duty; and,
IV. An ample commendation of it.

I. First, there is a pathetic introduction—that of entreaty: "I beseech you, brethren."

The precepts of the Gospel are not more accommodated to moral order, than is the manner in which they are proposed to the nature of the being to be swayed by them. It is a property of the human character, that while our fears may be made the instruments of restraining from crimes, it is only by the sense of the excellency of duty, with the hope of its rewards, that we can be animated to the practice of it. The truth of this is conspicuous in the relations of mankind among one another. In civil society, although the magistracy is to be a "terror to evil doers;" and, in respect to persons of that description, "the sword is not borne in vain;" yet it is not the fear of this, but it is the love of social order —it is conviction of its benign influence—it is the sense of an honorable interest in the public weal, which must inspire and cherish the virtues tending to the defence and to the ornament of the state. So, in domestic life, although "judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the backs of fools;" yet it is not by these, but it is by the mild majesty of sage instruction—it is by the sweet voice of affectionate persuasion—it is by the animating encourage-

ment of amiable example, that there must be an incitement to the conduct in the contemplation of Divine wisdom, when, personifying the parent, it makes the affectionate claim to filial duty—"my Son, give me thine heart."

The morality of the Gospel, harmonizing with nature and with providence, although it gives assurance of "tribulation and anguish to every soul of man that doeth evil," with other declarations to the same effect; yet never makes these the sanctions of the lessons which form the Christian character. No, it is in one place —"as though GOD did beseech you by us," and "we pray you in CHRIST'S stead;" it is in another—"I beseech you, by the meekness and gentleness of CHRIST;" it is in another—"I, the prisoner of the LORD, beseech you;" and it is in the text—"I beseech you, brethren." It is by these, and by the like entreaties, that we are animated to the perfection of Christian virtue. In stating the import of this introductory clause of the passage; it is impliedly, and may therefore explicitly be acknowledged, that in its rich contents there is nothing interesting to those, whose minds, to be awed only by an apprehension of the judgments of GOD, are not open to the persuasions of his love; so that if there be any in this assembly, who have no sensibility accommodated to the beauty of holiness, or who contemplate, as the principal privilege of duty over sin, mere rescue from a state of torment; or who have no higher rule of conduct, than what they persuade themselves to come up to the strict letter of the commands of GOD, without much regard to the holy spirit which they breathe; in respect to such, the text may be considered as making a call which cannot apply; as proposing sanctions which cannot move; as delineating a duty which cannot please; and as displaying commendations of it, which cannot allure.

II. Those of the opposite character may consistently go on to the second particular—the persuasive motive which the passage brings before us—"I beseech you, by the mercies of GOD."

The instance of Divine mercy particularly in view, is that which had been the subject of the epistle—the dispensation of love in the redemption: a dispensation, which had been intimated before the giving of the law; had been the end of the law itself; and had been, at last, made manifest by the Gospel: a dispensation, by which

the Gentile converts had been brought within the Church of CHRIST, agreeably to the foreknowledge and the predestination of GOD,—terms which, as used in this epistle, have a reference to that point only; and by which the Jews, although cast off for a while, should be brought in again, and so all Israel, that is, the nation as such, should be saved, or be of the family and flock of CHRIST. It is this dispensation, of which the apostle, just before the text, exclaims—"Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of GOD! For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things; to whom be glory for ever, Amen."

There has been this reference to the reasoning of the apostle; in order to show, that the instance of Divine benevolence, especially within his view, is that of its disclosing of an atonement for sin, not to be known but by revelation; and its opening of a prospect of immortality, no otherwise to be claimed than as of grace. This is the ground of the inference of the apostle—"I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of GOD." He may therefore be considered as speaking thus—If there be any value in the gift of Gospel grace; if it be the mean of the highest cultivation of the faculty, which maketh "us wiser than the beasts of the earth, and teacheth us more than the fowls of Heaven;" if the pardon of GOD, as proclaimed in Scripture, have been assured to you by its promises, and sealed to you by its sacraments; if its precepts have been your counsellors in dangers, and your monitors against temptations; if its consolations have been your encouragement in sickness, or in poverty, or in the loss of friends, or in any of the calamities of life; and if its bright prospects have borne up your minds with "an hope full of immortality;" I beseech you by these, and by all kindred motives, to have your ears and your hearts open to the instructive lesson that is to be laid before you. But although this is the mercy, especially within the view of the apostle; the spirit of his affecting motive extends to all the blessings which we receive from an indulgent Providence; and which may well, in allusion to a particular branch of divine benevolence, be called the mercies of GOD; since, considering our imperfections and our unworthiness, they are in a degree the result of that bounty, which "does good to the unthankful and the evil."

With this reference then, the apostle may be heard addressing us again, as follows—I beseech you, brethren, by that watchful providence of GOD, which guards you against seen and unseen dangers; which furnishes you with whatever comforts you possess, of family, of friendship, and of character or success in life; and which supplies every good thing, contributing to your sustenance or to your enjoyment; by these, and by all other, its merciful dispensations; which, unless thus sanctified to their true use, will be abused to the dishonoring of the good Being from whom they come, to the corrupting of your bodies, which should be sustained by them, and to the ruin of your immortal souls; by all these, and by whatever solid good can be derived from them, I beseech you to attend to the duty that is to follow.

III. This duty is the third particular. It is very comprehensive, and is thus expressed—"that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice."

The leading circumstance, is, a reference to a species of offering made to GOD, in virtue of his own appointment; and not, without great guilt, to be profaned to any other use. Accordingly, the apostle, intending to describe the entire sanctification accommodated to the Christian calling, makes an allusion to this expressive rite. The sacrifice mentioned, is that of the body; intended, in this place, of the whole man: the putting of a part for the whole being no uncommon mode of speech, and peculiarly proper here, because of the expression—*present** your bodies a sacrifice. The original verb is appropriated to the act of sacrificing; which, being a material transaction, renders the figure the more complete by an especial mention of the body. It is also to be "a living sacrifice;" to distinguish it from the sacrifices of the law, which exacted the death of the victim; agreeably to the saying of the apostle--"almost all things are by the law purged with blood." But the Christian ritual calls for a living sacrifice; and, except in the case of martyrdom, never requires the death or any less injury of the mortal part of us. That case being out of the question; there is not a precept of Scripture, but what is adapted to the health and

* παρασησαι.

the comfort of our bodies, no less than to the peace and the innocency of our souls. No, Religion, it is not thou; but it is licentiousness, thy wanton rival, who is continually offering up dying victims; not on the altar of GOD, but on that of the foe of GOD and man, who "goes about seeking whom he may devour."

It is a favorite idea of the New Testament, to represent Christian duty under the figure of a sacrifice: the reason of which cannot be fully seen, without a reference to the design and the completion of that mysterious kind of rite.

Without adverting to the sacrifices in the earliest ages of the world, and to speak of the Jewish sacrifices only; we find in them a lively delineation of the Divine person, who, in reference to these awful and instructive types, thus described himself as to fulfil them—"lo, I come to do thy will, O GOD." The New Testament, harmonizing with these prefigurations of the Old, declares their completion in "the one offering made by JESUS CHRIST, once for all;" and by this oblation, boundless as its merits, and ever living as to its efficacy, he is said to have "perfected for ever them that are sanctified." But if this be so, what further place is there for oblation or sacrifice, under the Gospel? The answer is, that, strictly speaking, there is none; and yet, that in a spiritual sense, there is the commemorative sacrifice in the Eucharist, of "the symbols of the body and blood of CHRIST;" this, not in the way supposed by the Romanists, as repeating the one great sacrifice of CHRIST; but only as showing it forth, according to his command. That in this point of view, it partakes of the nature of the subject commemorated, appears from the parallel run between the ordinance, and the legal and the Heathen sacrifice, in the tenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians. Beside, the inspired writers consider the doctrine laid down as so leading a truth of Scripture, that they delight in describing the several branches of duty as being also sacrifices; and even our persons as being such; to be made acceptable through the merits of the great sacrifice of all. Thus Christians are called by St. Peter, "a Priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to GOD through CHRIST." We are admonished by St. Paul—"to do good, and to communicate forget not; for with such sacrifices GOD is well

pleased;" in another place, to "offer to him the sacrifice of praise, which is the fruits of our lips, giving thanks to his name;" and here in the text, more significantly than in any of the others, to "present ourselves to him, as living sacrifices."

The propriety of the figure will still more appear, if we consider the nature of the legal sacrifices; which were either eucharistical, as acknowledging the dominion of GOD over his creatures; or expiatory, as representing the true atonement to be made for sin. The representing of ourselves as living sacrifices, beautifully answers to the former; in the acknowledgment which it implies, that we are GOD'S by creation and by redemption; and in shewing our readiness to "glorify him in our bodies and in our spirits, which are his." As to the latter, although the offering of ourselves can no more effect it, than that of "thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil;" yet it involves the application made of the merits of a more noble offering. At the same time, there is this expressive circumstance; that whereas, in the types which went before, the offals of "the beasts slain, were burnt without the camp;" so the rejection and the destruction of those worse offals, our corrupt passions, is essential to the Christian sacrifice in the spiritual worship under the Gospel.

It is then with great significancy, that Christian purity and duty are denoted by the metaphor of a sacrifice; which strongly describes the sanctifying of the whole man to the purposes for which his Creator designed, and to which religion calls him. Conformably to this act of spiritual sacrifice; the powers of our understandings are to be exercised on such objects as are implied in that Collect of our Church, in which we pray, that "by the inspiration of Almighty GOD, we may think those things which are good, and by his merciful guiding, we may perform the same." Our wills and our affections are to be in harmony with that other petition, in which we implore the Divine Being, that "we may love the things which he commandeth, and define that which he doth promise." And in regard to our appetites, those lower properties of our nature, and necessary entailments on it in this mortal state, we may describe its ascendency over them, by referring still to our Liturgy; where it prompts the prayer, that "our flesh being sub-

dued to the spirit, we may ever obey the Divine motions, in righteousness and true holiness."

Such is the Christian sacrifice: and here it is fit that we should severally ask ourselves, whether we have made, or are ready to make, this oblation of soul and body; of heart and action; of temporal existence and eternal. There is no subject, to which there will more pertinently apply the spirit of the address of Elijah to the Israelites, where he tells them—"if the LORD be GOD, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." It is no uncommon complaint against Religion, that she raises a painful struggle between the sense of duty and opposing inclination. The advocate of Religion may join with the complainant, in confessing the misery of such a state. But there will be this difference between them; that while her rival, for the remedy of them, would seduce to "the living without GOD in the world;" and the knowing of no law but appetite, and no object but gratification independently on duty; she, blessed instructress, admonishes us not to silence conscience, but to rise up to its demands—nor to aim at the impracticable work of serving GOD and Mammon; but to present ourselves to the former, a living sacrifice. As an incentive to this, there remains the last particular, which is the commendation given of the duty; as a "sacrifice holy, acceptable to GOD, and our reasonable service."

It is an holy sacrifice; being strictly so called, with a view to sacrifices under the law, which were holy in a relative sense merely, or with a reference to the religious uses to which they were appropriated; whereas the graces involved in the Christian sacrifice, are a real holiness, or rectitude of heart. Being thus distinguished from the sacrifices of old, it is still further distant from every offering of ourselves, or of our devotions, not consecrated to GOD, by a renovation of the spirit. It is, as an holy, so an acceptable sacrifice; being thus also distinguished from the offerings of the law; which, of themselves and independent on suitable dispositions, are declared to be of no avail. But here is an offering, the acceptance of which rests on the truth of the promises of GOD; being secured by the merits of that once dying but now living victim, who made an offering operating to the acceptance of ours, in

the great act by which he offered up Himself. As the Christian sacrifice differs in this respect from the Jewish, much more does it differ from every species of devotion, not attended by the sacrifice of sinful passion. To this, there applies with especial efficacy, the warning—"bring no more oblations;" such "incense is an abomination unto me," and "who hath required this at your hands, to tread my courts."

Further, it is a service paid to him to whom it is not only supremely due, but of whom it may be affirmed, that "his service is perfect freedom; being suited to the powers, and the source of whatever contributes to the true happiness of man; and unlike to that of sin, which is an usurpation dishonorable to him, and binding all the powers of his soul in a captivity to sense.

And it is "a reasonable service." It is still said in the way of comparison with the Levitical sacrifices, which were of senseless animals; whereas this is of a reasonable nature. It may also be called a reasonable service, in respect to the fitness of the duties which it exacts. These are no other than submission and piety to God, justice and charity to men, and the temperate government of ourselves: which are the perfection of reason, must have the approbation of mankind, at all times, and in all places; and are indeed a copy of that eternal reason, which is the law of the moral universe.

Such is the commendation given by the apostle of the duty to which he calls us: a duty which thus appears to be of high import; and to require the mortification of opposing passions. Yet, lest there should be discouragement on that account; let it be remarked, that the duty, if it were carried to the height, would be no more than the contributing of our part, to the immense tribute of praise which all nature should be incessantly sending up to her almighty Sovereign. Of the material works of the creation, it is expressively said in Scripture—"they continue this day according to thine ordinance; for all things serve thee." Yes, they continue from day to day, and from age to age, under the mechanical laws to which they were subjected at the creation; proclaiming the Divine hand of their great contriver. But His accountable creatures, are subjected to a moral law. Theirs is a reasonable

service: and it is only by a voluntary oblation of themselves, that they can join in the chorus of the creation. The bringing of us to bear a part in this magnificent act of praise, is the great design kept in view throughout the Christian revelation: which therefore invites us, not to a blind, not to a partial, not to a forced obedience, but to a rational, an entire, and a willing devotion of all our faculties and our affections. This surrender, under the favorite emblem in Scripture, of a sacrifice, is beautifully referred to in that most solemn office of our religion; in which, according to a form handed down to us from very early times, after celebrating the sacrifice of the death of CHRIST, and after offering the sacrifice commemorative of it in bread and wine; we offer ourselves, souls and bodies, to be living sacrifices unto the Divine Majesty. It is a sublime exercise of devotion; and full of edification and of comfort to all those, who thus dedicate themselves, without reserve, to their great Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer.